

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Alternatives Inc.

Application ID: 14AC158057

Program Name: Peninsula AmeriCorps Service and Support for Learning

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

The applicant adequately describes the low academic performance at the four identified Elementary Schools to support the need for an instructional intervention program. Across these schools, reading proficiency ranges from 41% to 51% and math 46% to 67%. These rates are well below the achievement success rates of 75% for English and 70% for math established by the Virginia Department of Education.

The applicant provides detailed behavioral challenges in the identified schools citing 81 offenses in Jenkins with a population of 450 and 94 offenses against others in Epes with a population of 522, making a strong case for the need for a mentoring program.

Statistics are cited with identified sources that verify the claims of low-income, low achievement, and poor social-emotional development.

State reading and math scores are compared to the schools that would be served by this grant to show the need to improved achievement, stating that these are the four lowest performing schools in the state of Virginia.

To state the severity of the community problem, the proposal provides data relating to the target community's poverty. For example, the proposal states that in Hampton 23.7%, and in Newport News 22.7%, of young people aged 0-17 live in poverty. Both rates are higher than the statewide average of 14.6%.

The proposal also states that 57.7% of Hampton City Schools students qualify for free or reduced lunch and in Newport News 60.4% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

With respect to student academic performance, the proposal states that third grade Standards of Learning scores are below the statewide average.

The proposal mentions that for the School Year 2012-13, listing the performance of targeted schools, Bryan's reading and math rates were 44%/67%; Palmer was 51%/48%; Jenkins was 42%/46%; and Epes was 41%/52%. These are below the established achievement success rate of 75% for English and 70% for Math and Science in the state of Virginia. This suggests that the schools are performing lower than expectations.

The proposal adds youth risk behavior data from a survey that identifies community disorganization, community mobility, and low neighborhood detachment as high risk factors. This suggests that the students are living in a challenging environment.

The design of the program is data-driven. Statistics on the effect of poverty provide the justification for program components.

The program addresses multiple needs.

Schools are selected based upon the highest need and lowest achieving students in the area and in the state.

A variety of programs will be offered to meet students' academic and social-emotional needs, as well as those in families and the community.

The proposal provides an evidence-base for the strategies of mentoring, pro-social behavioral skill development, and academics. This suggests that the model is likely to have a positive change on the students.

The proposal refers to experimental studies that investigated the pro-social behavioral skill development curriculum and found positive effects. The use of experimental studies implies a level of rigor within the evidence-base.

The proposal includes a comprehensive logic model that specifies elements of the intervention, such as the dosage and duration of the program, as well as the targeted population.

The applicant clearly outlines the targeted areas (ex. social-emotional) and the activities that will address them.

The intervention is well-aligned through the composition of the AmeriCorps members, the support given to them and the structure of the small group ratio.

Intervention activities are methodical, manageable and well-structured.

The proposal provides a logical alignment of the inputs, activities and outputs. This is evidenced by mentioning the number of AmeriCorps members and team composition at each of the four school sites leading to improved student performance as measured by improved reading and math test score performance, and increased pro-social and critical thinking skills. The inputs and outputs are linked directly by explicitly stating the activities, such as the math, science, reading and service learning curriculum as well as stating the duration and amount of the dosage.

Alternatives Inc. has implemented AI's Pals for the past seven years in early childhood centers with evaluation results that show that children in the program develop pro-social skills two to five times more than children who are not in the program. These findings are comparable to those of a study conducted by the product developer.

The application states that the organization met or exceeded its goals in previous years with other programs, demonstrating successful administration and completion of a large school intervention program.

Current programs successfully serve students from ages 3 to 18, providing resources for academic improvement, social and emotional learning, and family involvement.

The proposal notes that Alternatives has already carried out an AmeriCorps program with similar goals. Alternatives met or exceeded their performance measures for FY 11/12 and FY 12/13. This suggests that they have achieved a level of success in addressing their community problem of supporting students' learning and development through AmeriCorps.

Weaknesses:

The absence of information on the study design of the programs comparative to PASS makes the determination of the quality of those findings inconclusive.

Specific goals are not included to be able to measure the program's success throughout the year and beyond.

Data is not presented to demonstrate that the products selected are successful.

The proposal does not provide rigorous studies for its empirical warrant for using the particular intervention strategies. Moreover, these studies are not adequately described to assess if they all achieved their findings with similar demographics and similar dosage amounts of the interventions and activities.

It is difficult to assess how the frequency of the activities supports the expected outcomes, since the applicant has no quantitative projections of the intervention's impact. A lack of quantitative projections weakens the relationship of the inputs and outputs since there are qualitative statements that do not indicate the number of students that will exhibit these outcomes.

While the logic model shows the intended output for the social/emotional learning elements of the plan, it does not include goals for the reading, math, and science intervention components.

The applicant does not provide sufficient data to support academic and behavioral change in the 5,000 children impacted by the intervention over the past four years.

Data is not given to demonstrate the past success of the organization, including goals of the program, academic growth, and observations of students who have improved social and/or emotional behaviors.

It is unclear what the goals were for the different programs offered and how the organization measures its success.

The proposal does not provide student or child level data as to the impact of their previous work on the identified community problem. There is no evidence provided that the previous and current work has made an impact on any of the components of the problem.

